

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR RELEASE AT WILL

WASHINGTON, D.C. December 12, 1965. A collection of 365 woodcuts and metalcuts from the first century of printmaking in Europe will be shown at the National Gallery of Art from December 19 through January 30.

All but one of these 15th century prints have been given to the National Gallery by Lessing J. Rosenwald. They have never been shown as a unit before.

John Walker, Director of the National Gallery, announced that the exhibition will inaugurate a series of print exhibitions to be held at the National Gallery every one or two years. Selections will be made entirely from the holdings of the Gallery, and each exhibition will be devoted to a particular period of printmaking.

"Eventually," Mr. Walker said, "the collected catalogues for these exhibitions will form a scholarly published record of the print collection at the National Gallery of Art."

The entire Rosenwald collection of more than 20,000 prints and drawings was given to the Gallery over a number of years. Most of the collection will remain at Alverthorpe, the Rosenwald gallery in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia,

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during the donor's lifetime.

The early woodcuts and metalcuts to be shown in Washington this winter are actually products of the first process of printing. Shortly before the year 1400 Europeans learned to chip away from the outline of a sketch on wood, apply ink to the finished relief, and print copies on cloth. Paper, which was a more recent invention, came into printing use by the turn of the century.

Mr. Rosenwald explains the scarcity of early 15th century woodcuts in his preface to the exhibition catalogue. A few of these prints, he writes, were pressed into books, displayed in homes as icons, and even pasted inside money chests, as shown by an example in the exhibition. But like Christmas cards of our own time, most were eventually lost. Some unusual exceptions in the exhibition are a perpetual Easter calendar, a Christmas and New Year's card for 1483, and a poster for a tournament at arms.

A large printed and hand-colored impression of The Marriage at Cana is one of the few surviving textile woodcuts of this early period. It was printed on linen for a church lectern in the Tyrol, probably before 1400.

In the latter part of the 15th century, woodcuts began to fare a little better as they were used to illustrate books.

Late medieval prints were usually religious in subject. They were created in monasteries or carpenters' workshops to sell to travelers as souvenirs. Few were signed and most of the artists are forgotten. Two exceptions are "The Master of the Clubs," who marked his work with bold crossed clubs, and Dürer's teacher,

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Michael Wolgemut, whose style was his trademark. There are several fine examples of their work in this exhibition.

Richard Field of the National Gallery staff, who has written the notes for the fully illustrated catalogue, calls 15th century woodcuts and metalcuts "the last flowering of an era." He describes the primitive scenes with their expressionless actors as "a final look at the naive piety of the Middle Ages."

Mr. Rosenwald acquired hundreds of his 15th century woodcuts at a single stroke from Martin Aufhauser, a Munich banker who fled Germany after Hitler came to power. Mr. Rosenwald was able to buy from him 317 superb prints, including one of the largest woodcuts of that century, the Netherlandish Crucifixion in the exhibition.

Mr. Rosenwald describes the moment when the collection was brought to his office and offered for sale:

"Aufhauser, Jr. had a package under his arm that looked like something from the delicatessen...but after the string was removed ...what I beheld was better than discovering a whole chest full of pieces of eight from a sunken Spanish galleon."

End

Black-and-white glossy photographs, and catalogue on loan for purposes of publication are available from William W. Morrison, Assistant to the Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Area code 202, 737-4215, ext. 224.